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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: (i) participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by the National Women's Council of Catalonia, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Report of the National Women's Council of Catalonia to the forty-seventh periodic session of the Commission on the Status of Women (March 2003)

[Original: Spanish]

Foreword

The National Women's Council of Catalonia is the consultative body of the Catalonian Women's Institute, which is a grouping of most of the non-governmental organizations working to promote equal opportunity for women and men in Catalonia, Spain, and which has been in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 1999.

Introduction

The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, identified as an area of special concern the constant projection of negative and degrading images of women, as well as women's unequal access to information technology. After combating poverty and violence, access to technology is now the third priority for the world's women.

What the Platform for Action forecast in 1995 is now an infinitely greater reality. The latest wave of technologies, known as "new technologies" or "information and communication technologies" (ICT), derive from computer science, automated data processing and electronic telecommunications, which have filtered down from the technical sphere into the social and political spheres. The use of computer science and electronic communications has produced the information society.

As ICT plays an ever greater role in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, there is an ever greater need for sectors that have been silenced, including women, to participate actively in its management, with a view to fully winning the right to communication and strengthening their participation in public discourse and decision-making.

The National Women's Council of Catalonia is well aware of the importance of ICT as a unifying force that can help women to achieve their personal and professional goals and thereby reduce inequalities and discrimination. There are, however, obstacles, such as "differential access", which must be overcome before those goals can be achieved.

"Differential access" refers to the fact that men and women differ in their access to and experiences with computers, so that these technologies reflect traditional masculine values, and therefore women do not feel represented. Moreover, the dominant system of cultural values has discouraged women.

This difference in access, use and attitude begins to show up in childhood, even in the use of computers for play, since the vast majority of computer games are designed for a stereotypically male audience. For girls, however, the supply is meagre and highly manipulative; the games are almost insulting to girls, in that they reflect an image of girls as being interested in nothing but makeup, shopping and so on — in short, the stereotypes most commonly associated with the female sex.

There clearly has been some progress, and in some countries the situation is more evenly balanced, but, women continue to use ICT less than men do, and when we do use these technologies, we mostly do so only as users or consumers, far removed from the centres of creativity and decision-making. Consequently, as women we take less advantage of the benefits that ICT can provide and that are linked to growth, power, employment and wealth.

Women are also a minority in centres of research, science and computational technology.

The clear demarcation of roles within the family may be accentuated by the introduction of ICT. Far from implying a restructuring of internal power relationships, the arrival in the home of a computer — or of any technological innovation may accentuate existing differences.

Conclusions

The National Women's Council of Catalonia believes that the new technologies shaping the information society offer a unique opportunity to promote equality between women and men and restructure professional and day-to-day life; much remains to be done, however, to ensure that potential advantages materialize and to avoid reinforcing existing forms of gender segregation.

Nowadays, since relatively few women take courses in science or technology, they have fewer opportunities to exploit the employment-related advantages deriving from the new technologies (for example, highly skilled jobs in ICT industries, where women are underrepresented). Consequently, extra efforts must be made to increase students' awareness of ICT, in order to ensure that their education is not marred by sexist prejudices and to increase skill levels.

ICT can also help to convey a more positive and diversified image of women, contribute to changing attitudes and support women's more active participation in the production of information. For example, the goal of one of the European equal opportunities projects is to create Europe-wide databases of women who are experts in certain fields and women who participate in political decision-making. Information and communication technologies are used as a tool to educate underprivileged women, and the Internet is used to increase people's awareness of gender equality.

Governments must therefore pay more attention to gender balance in the information society in order to ensure that the potential benefits are shared equally and to avoid the risk of segregation.

We therefore wish to make the following recommendations to Governments:

- Carry out a specific, gender-disaggregated survey on women's use of ICT in the various countries and on their participation in ICT-related jobs and in the telecommunications and information industries;
- Find out more about the specific needs — in terms of access to resources, training and education, and better working conditions — of the various groups of women who might be excluded from the innovation processes, so that venues and strategies may be established to facilitate their inclusion;

- Monitor compliance with the labour rights of women workers in the ICT field and support employee recruitment and selection strategies that do not discriminate against women in the area of wages, benefits and promotions;
- Formulate or adapt legal guidelines regulating the labour rights and obligations of those who choose telecommuting as their means of livelihood;
- Promote public policies to provide universal access to new information and communication technologies and to lower the cost of accessing and using them with a view to overcoming the "digital divide";
- Establish and promote mechanisms to encourage women's participation on an individual or group basis in taking decisions about the design, use and efficiency of technological systems;
- Promote the production and dissemination of children's computer games that avoid gender stereotypes through design and applications that are easily understandable to both girls and boys;
- Formulate a compulsory code of ethics, to be signed by all countries, defining parameters for portraying women and girls in all communications media, with a view to preventing the pornographic and degrading treatment to which they are subjected in certain parts of the communications network;
- Provide education and literacy programmes, using appropriate technologies, aimed especially at low-income girls and women;
- Influence public opinion, with a view to promoting gender equality, on the basis of information and communication programmes using ICT;
- Encourage the appropriate use of ICT in order to eliminate gender disparities, especially in education;
- Take steps to exploit the potential of ICT to reduce the social divide, improve living conditions, and increase access to health services, distance learning and information for women living in rural areas or in underserved communities;
- Develop funding policies and strategies to promote women's access to entrepreneurship based on the development of information and communication technologies, which open up new opportunities for women to be included as entrepreneurs in Internet-based education and health services and in electronic commerce and business;
- Encourage ICT research programmes in developed countries that focus on the eradication of hunger and poverty in the least developed countries, where women are subjected to marginalization and exclusion.